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CABINET APPROVES EXPORT OF AKASH MISSILE SYSTEM

The Union Cabinet on Wednesday cleared export of the indigenously-developed surface-to-air missile system

GLOBAL COMPETENCE FOR INDIAN PRODUCTS

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh said the export version of Akash missiles will be different from the system currently deployed with the Indian Armed Forces. The Akash missile systems have 96% indigenous components. "This decision will help the country improve its defence products and make them globally competitive," the Defence Minister said

FORCES TO SPEND $130 BN IN NEXT 5 YRS

- Govt plans to focus on selling high-value defence platforms to achieve a target of $5 billion in arms exports
- Forces to spend $130 bn in capital procurement in the next 5 yrs
- The government has set a target of ₹1.75 lakh crore ($25 billion) turnover in defence manufacturing by 2025

25 km

AKASH MISSILE SYSTEMS CAN HIT TARGETS WITHIN THIS RANGE

CHENNAI • MADURAI • VIJAYAWADA • BENGALURU • KOCHI • HYDERABAD • VISAKHAPATNAM • COIMBATORE • KOZHIKODE • THIRUVANANTHAPURAM • BELAGAVI • BHUBANESWAR • SHIVAMOGGA • MANGALURU • TIRUPATI • TRICHY • TIRUNELVELI • SAMBALPUR • HUBBALLI • DHARMAPURI • KOTTAYAM • KANNUR • VILLUPURAM • KOLLAM • WARANGAL • TADEPALLIGUDEM • NAGAPATTINAM • THRISSUR • KALABURAGI

2020: PANDEMIC & PROTESTS

While the govt has clinched a deal with farmers over power tariff and stiff penalties for stubble burning; other issues remain; It is also yet to decide on a vaccine

ASSOCHAM WRITES TO PUNJAB CM

Assocham on Wednesday wrote to Punjab CM Captain Amarinder Singh, expressing concern over damage to over 1,600 mobile towers during farmers' protest

Union Agriculture Minister Narendra Singh Tomar, Railway Minister Piyush Goyal and MoS for Commerce Som Prakash have food served by farmers during a snack break at a meeting over new farm laws, at Vigyan Bhawan in New Delhi on Wednesday | PTI

Unions were apprehensive about farmers being included. Farmers also feel if reform is introduced in the Electricity Act, they will suffer losses

Narendra Singh Tomar

2 easy ticks, but farm laws and MSP stay sticky

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
@ New Delhi/Chandigarh

THE sixth round of talks between the Centre and agitating farm unions on Wednesday appeared to have produced a partial breakthrough as both sides agreed on two points — air pollution law and the electricity amendment bill — but there was no meeting ground on the more contentious issues of the repeal of the farm laws and legal guarantee for MSP.

The improving chemistry was also exemplified by the fact that Union ministers Narendra Tomar, Piyush Goyal and Som Prakash accepted the 'langar' food offered by the farmers while the protesters for the first time accepted the tea served by the government. Union leaders had earlier refused to eat food served by the government during the previous round of talks.

After the five-hour marathon talks on Wednesday, Union agriculture minister Tomar said the next round of talks would be held on January 4.

Sensing a slightly accommodative government and also in view of the agreement on two of their demands, the farmers decided to put off the tractor rally they had planned for Thursday along the Kundli-Manesar-Palwal Expressway just outside Delhi.

While the government tried to paint the sixth round of talks as positive with Tomar claiming the meeting ended on a good note, the farmers said the agreement on two smaller issues can't be termed a breakthrough as they are firm on their main demands of repeal of the laws and MSP.

Tomar said the government had agreed to "decriminalise" the Commission for the Air Quality Management in National Capital Region and Adjoining Areas Ordinance, 2020, while the electricity amendment bill has been put on hold.

"The first issue was an ordinance related to the environment. Unions were apprehensive about farmers being included. Farmers also feel if reform is introduced in the Electricity Act, they will suffer losses," Tomar said.

Noting that the government has softened its stance, All India Kisan Sabha general secretary Hannan Mollah, who attended the talks, said, "I don't call it a breakthrough or victory, but some advancement."

Bharatiya Kisan Union (Rajewal) president Balbir Singh Rajewal said, "The government is still adamant on the repeal of the farm laws and MSP. We are hopeful the government will agree on them also." P9

Blow to BJP in Haryana civic poll

HARPREET BAJWA @ Chandigarh

A year after the NDA comprising the BJP and the Jannayak Janata Party came into power in Haryana, it suffered a setback in the civic body elections, as it lost mayoral/presidential positions in five of the seven municipal bodies that went to polls, the results of which were announced on Wednesday.

Coming as it did in the backdrop of the month-long agitation by farmers, analysts sought to read in the outcome the disquiet of the tillers, who constitute a large chunk of the voters. Independents did remarkably well, wresting presidentships of Uklana, Dharuhera, and Sampla municipalities.

Oxford vaccine gets UK nod, India seeks more information

SUMI SUKANYA DUTTA
@ New Delhi

HOURS after the UK approved the Oxford-AstraZeneca Covid vaccine for human use on Wednesday, India's drug regulator met on Wednesday to review the applications by Serum Institute of India and Bharat Biotech. However, the meeting remained inconclusive as the Drugs Controller General of India's Subject Expert Committee was not satisfied with the applications of either of the companies. The next meeting will be held on January 1.

"SII has been asked to submit more data from AstraZeneca trial globally, while Bharat Biotech will have to submit the interim analysis of phase 3 trial," said a source.

Serum Institute is conducting a bridging phase-three clinical trial of the AstraZeneca vaccine Covishield on 1,700 volunteers in India. Bharat Biotech, whose homegrown Covaxin has been developed in collaboration with the ICMR, is being tested on 26,000 people in late-stage trial.

Covishield has been found to be 70% effective in multi-country phase-3 trials, while a recent scientific paper published on Covaxin's phase-1 and phase-2 trials said it could lead to generation of antibodies lasting up to 6-12 months.

Pfizer, the first company to apply for its Covid-19 vaccine in India, has sought for more time to submit data for its vaccine's consideration.

The UK's drug regulator, Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency said the second dose of the vaccine will be given 12 weeks later as a longer interval between two doses could produce better results.

Meanwhile, Chinese vaccine maker Sinopharm has claimed to have 79% efficacy rate.

India's daily number of Covid-19 cases jumped 6.88% to touch 20,021 on Wednesday.

Centre extends flight ban from Britain till January 7

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
@ New Delhi

WITH the number of Indians testing positive for the Covid-19 strain from the UK jumping to 20, the Centre on Wednesday decided to extend the suspension of flights from the island nation till January 7.

The Union health ministry also asked states to be vigilant about potential "super spreader" events such as New Year celebrations.

The developments follow the identification of the B117 variant, reported to be highly infectious, in the country.

A total of 107 samples from infected persons have been subjected to whole genome sequencing at six designated laboratories in different parts of the country so far. P9

New Chief Secy Ravi Kumar has daunting task ahead

BALA CHAUHAN @ Bengaluru

The senior-most IAS officer and Additional Chief Secretary (ACS) P Ravi Kumar has been appointed as the new Chief Secretary (CS) of Karnataka.

He succeeds the outgoing Chief Secretary T M Vijay Bhaskar.

Kumar belongs to the 1984 IAS batch and is the 38th Chief Secretary of Karnataka.

P Ravi Kumar

Ravi Kumar is known for his integrity and impeccable track record. He is a career bureaucrat and has held many important posts in Karnataka, including his previous position as the ACS to the State Government, which is considered as second to the Chief Secretary, as ACS to the Chief Minister and ACS (Power) among other posts.

The new Chief Secretary has a huge task of steering the state through a looming revenue crisis because of the pandemic and a possible second wave of Covid-19. The government is yet to post an ACS, State Government, in place of Kumar. According to sources, Additional Chief Secretary and Development Commissioner Vandita Sharma is likely to be posted in the vacancy.

EXPRESS READ

Deadline to file I-T returns now Jan 10

New Delhi: The government on Wednesday extended the deadline to file I-T returns for individuals by 10 days to January 10, 2021. This is the third time the government has extended the deadline — first from the normal deadline of July 31 to November 30, and then to December 31.

Prohibitory orders from 12 noon to 6 am

Bengaluru: City Police Commissioner Kamal Pant has revised prohibitory orders for New Year's Eve, extending it by six hours for the city. It will now be in force from 12 noon on December 31 to 6 am on January 1, 2021. During these hours, not more that five can gather in public places.

LIFTING THE MOOD

Eager to put the gloom and doom of 2020 behind them, citizens step towards the New Year with hope and faith in the vaccine. Commercial Street, which turns into a fairy-lit stretch this time of the year, beckons the shopper | SHRIRAM BN

EARLY FIGURES

BJP makes huge inroads in GP polls

BANSY KALAPPA @ Bengaluru

WITH the counting of votes for the gram panchayat elections stretching, the State Election Commission (SEC) has said that the complete results can be expected only by Thursday morning. Though the initial numbers showed that the BJP, which is in power in the state, had done well in about 48 per cent of the gram panchayats, as the results continued to trickle in, the party seemed to be putting up a better show in about 52 per cent of the seats.

In an official statement on Wednesday, the SEC said, "While the gram panchayat results from 54,041 out of 91,339 seats have come in, the results for the remaining 36,781 seats are still not available and will be expected on Thursday morning." The process of counting of ballots is long-drawn as each round takes about two hours. After every round, the counting agents are changed and, if there is any objection, the process can take longer.

While officially, the gram panchayat elections are apolitical, with no party symbols, most candidates are unofficially supported by political parties. Over 5,700 gram panchayats went to the polls in two phases this month.

The outcome of these grassroots-level elections have impressed the party so much that CM B S Yediyurappa has decided to himself address the media about the party's performance on Thursday. P5

NOT IN SYNC

Night curfew: Two ministers have different takes

Following the detection of the new strain of the SARS-CoV2 virus, two ministers have issued contradictory statements on implementing night curfew, indicating that there may be no consonance. Chief Minister B S Yediyurappa, however, said the government will stick to the guidelines issued by the Centre

Whatever we do has to be effective in restraining people from venturing out. There is no point in implementing a curfew perfunctorily and I will discuss with the CM on implementing a curfew. This is very important now, as this (new strain of virus) is fast spreading. We have to be more careful and people should also behave responsibly. We will discuss with the CM and come out with necessary regulations

R Ashoka, Revenue Minister

We (health department) had already given the recommendations and the government has already made a decision. I can't disclose what recommendations we had made. Night curfew is a closed chapter and the CM has also clarified on the issue. We have also recommended to the Home dept on steps to be taken to contain the spread of the virus during New Year celebrations. We hope they will implement them

Dr K Sudhakar, Health Minister

Covid safety lessons during 1st hour for schoolkids

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
@ Bengaluru

THE Primary and Secondary Education Department has decided to dedicate the first period of school for Classes 10 and 12 to educate children on the Covid-19 pandemic and the safety norms they need to follow.

The department has instructed teachers across the state to ensure that children are given awareness and keep themselves safe by maintaining social distance, wearing masks, avoiding gatherings and by washing hands frequently with soap and water. Also, teachers have been asked to keep an eye on children's physical and mental health.

Primary and Secondary Education Minister S Suresh Kumar said, "All teachers have to wear face masks at all times and teachers aged over 50 should compulsorily wear face shield."

On Wednesday, the minister visited several schools and colleges in Bengaluru to inspect the preparedness first hand, as the institutions are set to reopen from January 1, 2021. He asked the teachers to boost the confidence of children to face the board exams and motivate them to score well. P6

Primary and Secondary Education Minister S Suresh Kumar interacts with students during a visit to a college in Bengaluru on Wednesday | EXPRESS

GETTING READY FOR SCHOOL

- All must wash/sanitise hands both at entry and exit
- Teachers should provide Covid-19 negative report
- Limited number of students in each classroom with social distance
- School premises, class rooms and toilets must be sanitised every evening after classes
- Students must carry drinking water from home
- Parents' consent letter a must to attend classes
- Physical attendance is not mandatory